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Artists and creatives in Winston-Salem share the things they are thankful for

Fran Daniel Nov 26, 2020

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John Bowers, event and campaign coordinator in office of advancement at UNC School of the Arts, theatre artist and puppetry artist.

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Thanksgiving 2020 will no doubt be different from last year's holiday for many individuals and families in Winston-Salem and throughout the Triad in these times of uncertainty amid COVID-19.

But it's still the season for giving thanks, and local artists and creatives are sharing what they are thankful for.

Lea Lackey-Zachmann, a visual artist and founding member of Artworks Gallery in Winston-Salem, will have fewer people over for Thanksgiving this year than in the past — just six people made up of immediate family and a neighbor.

"I am thankful for the acceptance of diversity as I see it in my life," Lackey-Zachmann said. "For the past 40 years, my husband and I have invited at least eight to 10 people over for Thanksgiving dinner. Most of them are friends who aren't enjoying Thanksgiving with family. They feel like family, and I appreciate the honor of having them join us. We actually talk about the two no-nos, religion and politics! We all come from different backgrounds and have divergent perspectives. The discussion is often heated but funny and easy.

"When one enjoys a full tummy and participates in a stimulating/inspired gathering with acceptance and respect, life can't get much richer or better than that! This is so especially if you add a plate of music that includes at least some classical, jazz, old rock and some new sounds for a challenge.

"I'm very appreciative of the diversity of all that is. We live in such a wonderfully complex world and our diversity in thought, word and deed is staggering. We are living in a time when division and intolerance of differing opinions are rampant. I know that we can accept opposing opinions and live peacefully with one another because I've seen it at my Thanksgiving table for years. It gives me reason to hope and I'm thankful for it."

Jordan Booker-Medley, an engagement and relations services manager for Arts Council of Winston-Salem and Forsyth County and a dancer, is looking forward to making new memories with his husband.

"I'm a dancer, and when COVID-19 hit, I found myself shut out of studios, teaching dance classes on zoom, and missing the way my muscles ache after an arduous ballet barre," Booker-Medley said. "My then-fiancé, also a dancer, found himself trapped for months on a cruise ship docked in San Diego. His debut voyage as the first black Tarzan in Disney Cruise Lines history cut short. Like performing artists (and others) everywhere, there was plenty for us to be devastated about.

"Despite the devastation, we got married in June (we were high school sweethearts), became dog dads, and convinced ourselves to buy meal-prep kits so that we can start cooking at home again. Traditionally, we would spend Thanksgiving surrounded by family with no shortage of laughs, games and mom's famous candied yams. This year may look a little different, but there are still so many things to be thankful for.

"I'm thankful for the new memories we will create as newlyweds. I'm thankful for new beginnings, as my husband transitions from dance to start his journey in the spring to get his bachelor's degree in nursing. I'm thankful that even when creativity feels stifled, we are still finding ways to create. We've had random dance parties in the kitchen. We've practiced TikTok dances in our living room and have reminisced about our eccentric college dance professors. This Thanksgiving, we will definitely dance a little harder, eat until our stomachs cramp, and take tons of Instagram videos with our puppy."

John Bowers, events and campaign coordinator for the UNC School of the Arts Office of Advancement, a freelance theatre artist and puppetry artist, spoke of the importance of spending time with family and engaging with those closest to you, especially during this COVID-19 situation.

"I am thankful for the support of my fiancé and her son, who encourage my work as an artist even when it results in long hours away from home and less time together with them," Bowers said. "This year, we are spending our Thanksgiving at our home in West Salem, just the three of us, and fully intend to have a very relaxing day.

"Our family keeps a vegetarian diet, so we enjoy getting creative with our cooking on Thanksgiving Day. We will also spend time this year reading stories of Native Americans from our region, recognizing that we are living on stolen land. We feel that honoring the lives that were lost and the culture that was dismantled as a result of early American colonization is important to create an honest picture of the holiday."

Martha Bassett, musician and host of "The Martha Bassett Show," said she and her partner traditionally spend Thanksgiving ordering in Indian food.

"I'm thankful for this prompt to list the things for which I'm thankful," Bassett said. "First of all, like most performing artists, I lost a lot of paying jobs this year, and I'm thankful to have a church job that continues to keep me on staff. It's a luxury that I don't take for granted. I'm thankful to WFDD for airing my show, and to all those folks who listen and watch our livestreams. I'm thankful for our team of musicians and technical personnel who come up with creative solutions to make the show work virtually. I'm thankful to The Reeves Theater for allowing us to use their beautiful space while they're closed to the public.

"This may sound silly, but I'm thankful for the internet. It's allowed me to do livestreams from church, from my living room, from The Reeves. Ultimately, it's how many of us are working these days. Imagine the isolation we'd feel without it. We can shop, attend meetings, have virtual parties, be entertained, find information, talk face to face with friends and family.

"Speaking of shopping, I'm thankful for those who leave the safety of their homes so that I can buy groceries, get my oil changed, order a pizza. I'm thankful for my health (my own and my family's), which is never a given, but is now more in my awareness.

"Even though 2020 has felt endless, I'm thankful for the slowing down of time and the imposition of limits to my comings and goings. I know now that I've busied myself with things that I thought were important or that I had to do. This year, I've talked more regularly with my kids and my parents. I've gotten to know my neighbors. Working from home has given me so much more uninterrupted practice time. I've been more regimented and gone deeper with the music I'm working on. I'm thankful that my porch has been my office most of the year, and that I now know the chipmunks, squirrels and birds in my yard on a first name basis. As the new year arrives — hopefully with a vaccine in tow — I want to remember the good lessons of 2020, and live life with a keener vision of what is mine to do."

Christopher Gilliam, director of the Winston-Salem Symphony Chorus and director of choral activities at Wake Forest University, plans to start a tradition this year for Thanksgiving by traveling to a place in the United States that he has not had the opportunity to see. He suggested checking with him in a year to see if this new tradition stuck.

"Among the many things I'm thankful for, music rises to the top," Gilliam said. "When I discovered music as a fifth-grader in the school musical, I found an instant outlet for my creative energy and enthusiasm. Music challenged me, was a huge source of comfort to me, and gave me a niche in which to focus myself and my energies. Music has opened up exciting opportunities for me to travel the world performing — singing and conducting — with some of the most wonderful people in the world, as well as an opportunity to mentor and teach future performers and music enthusiasts.

"Music gave me a purpose and helped me gain the confidence to do what I would have never dreamed possible for myself, providing me opportunities I likely would never have known. My career in music would not have been possible, of course, were it not for the support of family and the amazing teachers in elementary, high school and college who encouraged me and who taught me the value of education and the discipline of the art.

"I'm also very grateful that my academic career led me back to North Carolina, first to Davidson College for the past eight years and now at Wake Forest University, because these appointments enabled me to be near my mother for the last precious years of her life. She passed away in September, so this will be my first Thanksgiving without her. I will always give thanks for the wonderful life and example she lived, and I'm grateful to have had the opportunity to share with her so many wonderful conversations and memories together before her parting."

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